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INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER, CASTE AND CLASS

Agenda building in the Indian women's movement

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The Indian women's movement that was active during the freedom movement prior to 1947 has become particularly visible since the 1970s. Scholars and activists have documented a variety of aspects of the movement: historical trajectory, urban-based women's groups, impacts of opportunities that arose after the 1970s, the rise of caste-based activism, and concerns over the rise of the religious right, particularly since the 1980s (Kumar 1993; Sarkar and Butalia 1995; Phadke et al. 2011; Omvedt 1993). The 1990s and early twenty-first century have seen debates around the Women's Reservation Bill (for quotas in state legislatures and national parliament), discussions on reproductive and sexual rights, including alternate sexualities, and an increasing attempt to use 'culture' as the grounds for policing women's sexuality.

Despite the progress made by the Indian women's movement, women living in modern India still confront many issues of inequality, discrimination and social exclusion. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining equality within the family, economic or land-ownership rights, access to education, and leadership positions within the government and in the private sector challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion in the name of honour, security or economic burden. For Indian women's activists, these injustices are worth challenging. However, critics of the movement point to its emphasis on privileged women and the neglect of the needs and representation of poor Dalit women (Rege 1998; Rege et al. 2013; Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1997).

Over 200 million Dalits live in India (Government of India Census 2011). Most Dalits live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education (Human Rights Watch 1999; Mendelsohn 1998; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1994). With the exception of a minority who have benefited from India's policy of reservation or 'quotas' in education and government jobs, many Dalits are relegated to the most menial tasks and may even be trapped in bonded labour as

they struggle to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors (Human Rights Watch 1999; O'Neill 2003). Although poor Dalit women are said to be at the receiving end of the 'triple oppression' of gender, caste and class, Dalit women's groups have challenged gender and caste discrimination by demanding basic needs such as housing.

Intersectionality – intersections of gender, caste and class – is at the centre of considering women's lives and movement activity seeking social change for women.[1] Dalit women's historical experiences from the perspective of caste, economic class, politics and patriarchal angles, aimed towards transformation in work, wages and family life, have been examined by scholars (e.g., Guru 1995; Guru 2016; Rege 1998, 2006; Omvedt 1993; Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1997; Subramaniam 2006; Kumar 2008). In addition, Dalit-queer intersectionality has received the attention of scholars (cf. Baudh 2013, 2017; Shankar and Gupta 2017) but a deeper investigation of this topic is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, most analyses of the movement overlook the parallel Dalit movement and tend to treat the Indian women's movement as purely the national movement occurring primarily in cities among the more educated with some exceptions (Ray 1998; Roy 2015; Gupta 2016; Iyer 2016; Roychowdhury 2013; for exceptions see Govinda 2013; Dutta and Sircar 2013). In this chapter, we situate the dynamics of the movement by focusing on caste, particularly the rise of Dalit feminism and the Dalit standpoint, and the recognition by scholars of the need for deepening the debate on intersectionality for building solidarities.

Agenda building: gender, caste and class

Social movement scholars conceptualize political opportunities and constraints as key to understanding the macro-level dynamics in propelling movements forward or in diminishing their propensity to seek change (Tarrow 1994). Attempts by social movement scholars to understand the overlaps and alignments between movements and institutionalized party politics include both the emergence of political parties from movement groups and the creation of women's groups affiliated to political parties (Chandra 2004; Ray 1998).

We suggest considering movement activity as the setting up or building of an agenda in pursuit of a specific form of political action. Agenda setting is the identification of social problems for inclusion in public and governmental agendas that focus predominantly on formal political power. Agenda building involves consistent efforts to influence the interpretation and prioritization of social problems as injustices and challenge them to seek change.[2] While agenda setting is built around formal political gain, agenda building is about organized action for change. Therefore, mobilization of specific groups of people can serve different purposes depending on whether their focus is on agenda setting or agenda building. Our emphasis in this chapter is on agenda building because we consider it key to challenging social injustice.

Movement activity in the form of agenda building is necessary to ensure that the agenda-setting process includes concerns of intersectional issues of gender, caste

and class. For instance, concerted effort by the women's movement enabled shaping the agenda-building process in ways that compelled the state to interpret harassment for dowry as a gendered crime within families rather than as a gender-neutral social evil (Agnes 1992; Subramaniam and Krishnan 2016). Whether the agenda building process of the Indian women's movement has been successful in including intersectional issues of caste and class in the agenda-setting process needs careful analysis.

Some, such as Hill (2008) and Kumar (2006, 2008), argue for considering the forms and processes of gender and caste inequality that are operative for the capitalist system of exploitation, which uses formal education to reproduce patterns of social and economic inequalities. Rather than emphasizing the struggles specifically for the rights of Dalits, a Marxist approach and analysis for political struggle foreground class relations without considering concerns based on caste. In fact, Kumar (2008) observes that one of the most frequently debated issues in the Indian context is the marginalization of class and the emphasis of caste as the key form of social difference.

The decade of the 1920s saw the emergence of the Dalit movement as an organized force. The Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) aimed for the liberation of untouchables and added the fight against capitalism to the fight against Brahmanism. In the 1930s, Ambedkar organized peasants and workers under his Independence Labor Party (ILP). Ambedkar was the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee at the time of independence in 1947 and was the architect of India's affirmative action programme (the reservation policy with quotas for Dalits). Ambedkar was a strong critic of the Indian National Congress and sought allies among independent non-Brahmans and peasant forces in the states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Bihar (Omvedt 1993). In the post-war period of the 1940s, several educated young women joined the peasant movement (Kumar 1993; Forbes 1996).

During the post-independence period (i.e., post-1947), three major developments related to Dalit organizing are important to note for the purposes of this chapter. The first is the fractionation of the major political party, the Indian National Congress, that laid the foundation for the inclusion of caste-based interests in formal party politics. Non-Brahman leaders sought to create a base of Dalits by forming organizations such as the Dalit Panthers (DP) in the Western state of Maharashtra and in Tamil Nadu, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) in the southern state of Karnataka, and the Dalit Panthers (DP) in Tamil Nadu, which later evolved into the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) political party. The second major development is the rise of Dalit leaders, such as Kanshi Ram, who formed the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The emergence of BSP as a formidable political party coincided with the rise of a Dalit woman, Mayawati, as its leader, who was elected as the chief minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh (UP).

The third development is the rise of the Dalit women's movement in the post-1980s, the key focus of this chapter; it added a new dimension to caste politics and focused on agenda building to address concerns of gender, caste and class. The inclusion of Dalit women's voices in political processes, whether in formal party

politics or in social movements, pushes organizations to attend to intersections of caste, class and gender in their agenda (Rege 1998). This idea was central to the concept of Dalit feminism that emerged in the 1980s, a period that was marked by the newly visible considerations of caste identity as well as debates about the role of caste in social transformation (Kothari 1994).

Agenda building in grass-roots mobilization

Grass-roots organizations of Dalit women have taken the form of local movements, national-level federations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and impromptu action. Even within movements – the broader Dalit movement or women's movement – they have had to struggle to make their voices heard. Grass-roots organizations of Dalits, such as the DSS, focused on injustice and discrimination against Dalits and challenged caste-based privileges. In Karnataka, the DSS spread its activities throughout the state, covering a wide range of issues and drawing inspiration from a range of available anti-caste writing (see Zelliot 2001; Manasa 2000). In recent years, it has launched many struggles, including pressurizing the government to distribute land to landless Dalits, release bonded labourers and ban the nude parade of Dalit women before the goddess Yellama in Shimoga (Manasa 2000). However, the leadership structures of these organizations continued to be male-dominated (Deshamane 1996). The emergence of Dalit women's activism is therefore important to trace.

There is no single point in time or place marked 'start' for the Dalit women's movement. Dalit women were involved in the peasant movement and saw a vision of India that promised social and economic justice for men and women and the rich and poor. Among these are the Tebhaga movement in Bengal (eastern India) and the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh (southern India). The movements brought substantial gains to the peasantry. During the 1970s, Dalit women in towns in Maharashtra state formed an organization and edited a monthly magazine (Omvedt 1993). These attempts were short-lived and the Dalit movement did not show any support for the independent organizing of Dalit women (Omvedt 1993). Yet, the 1980s saw an increasing consideration of the Dalit woman's cause. Literature and writing were at the centre of such consideration in spite of the class bias of who has the access and power to write (via education).

By the late 1980s, there was renewed organizing among Dalit and other backward caste women and much of this was localized. For instance, Ruth Manorama, a Dalit Christian from Bangalore involved in organizing slum dwellers, began to speak of the 'triply oppressed', focusing on Brahmanism as a major factor in women's oppression while including gender as a critical category of analysis (Omvedt 1996). The early 1990s saw the formation of autonomous Dalit women's organizations at both national and sub-national levels. Such an assertion raised crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the Brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics (Rege 1998). The initial debates about the emergence of autonomous Dalit women's organizations came

to rest but with little 'revisioning of feminist politics' (Rege 1998: WS39). This then led to consideration of possible multiple/plural feminist standpoints. That is to say, the separate assertion by Dalit women's organizations came to be accepted as one more standpoint, and within such a framework of 'difference', issues of caste become the sole responsibility of Dalit women's organizations.

The Dalit feminist standpoint acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among Dalit women acquiring a perspective against an unjust order but it does not celebrate oppressive traditions merely because they are practised by the oppressed. By directing attention to the cultural and material dimensions of the interface between gender and caste, the focus of a Dalit feminist standpoint is squarely placed on social relations, which examines oppressions based on difference. Such a view points to the failure of upper-caste women to critically and systematically interrogate their situation of advantage. The structural and individual dimensions of caste are often 'invisible' from privileged positions and require a 'conscious' effort to problematize the complexly constituted social locations that women occupy (Ambewadikar 2016). Thus, Dalit women have spoken out about their traumatic experiences while theorizing their pain and anger in their autobiographical writings.

The growing literature on Dalit women emerged in response to the emphasis of upper-caste experiences in literature, written mainly by those from the upper caste (Subramaniam 2006). Dalit women's writing, such as *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *Sangati* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar, brought attention not only to Brahmanical hegemony but also to patriarchal domination, while keeping alive the tradition of self-assertion in Dalit movements. The books published in the 1980s and after contributed to the growing momentum of the Dalit women's movement in later years (Rege 2006). They included poetry, short stories, autobiographies and essays (Zelliot 2001). Such writings have, on the one hand, served as documentation of the activism and, on the other hand, as the foundation for organizing for specific interests.

As noted earlier, in the 1990s several independent and autonomous Dalit women's organizations were established. The *National Federation of Dalit Women* (NFDW) was formed in New Delhi in1995, the *All India Dalit Women's Forum* was formed in 1996, and an organization of Dalit Christian women was established in 1997. The NFDW – an autonomous, secular, democratic organization of Dalit women in India – has evolved out of a process that began in 1987, when the first national-level meeting of Dalit women took place in Bangalore under the auspices of the *Christian Dalit Liberation Movement*. At the end of that meeting, there was a strong feeling that Dalit women need to organize themselves in order to address their special needs and problems (Joseph 1995).

The NFDW founding convention was attended by over 300 Dalit women from across the country. Among the many items considered at the convention was the devadasi system, including the eradication of the system and uplifting those women and children already trapped in the system. The NFDW, a membership-based organization, set up a national task force with Ruth Manorama as the convener.

The task force planned to hold regional meetings and mobilize more Dalit women into the process of resisting oppression and acknowledging their identity as Dalit women with dignity (Joseph 1995). Such organizing differed from the process adopted by other Dalit leaders, such as Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, in that the Dalit women's movement aimed at social power and justice rather than formal political power. Similar to the Indian women's movement, the NFDW sees the state as responsible for granting rights and developing ways for bringing change for lower-caste women.

At the grass-roots level, Dalit women have struggled to break deeply entrenched social hierarchies. In instances such as in Bundelkhand (Uttar Pradesh), collectives of Dalit women declined to follow the practice of taking off their footwear before passing by the houses of the upper castes (Majumdar 2016). As members of self-help groups (SHG), these women were made aware of their rights along with information about government policies. It was at one of the SHG meetings that the bleeding foot of a member led to a discussion of the practice and eventually the collective resistance (Majumdar 2016). Local grass-roots organizing is further strengthened by regional and national activities led by Dalit women and activists who facilitate the creation of networks. Such organizing was distinct from the work of NGOs, which are often vulnerable to co-optation by resource providers. In addition, organizing and creating networks allow for challenging issues such as violence faced by Dalit women.

While the Dalit movement acknowledges the oppression of women in general, it is important to note that Dalit women face violence which is specific to caste. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, four Dalit women are raped every day in India. At the same time, violence against Dalit women, such as assaults and rape, is used to settle caste scores, leaving the women with no say in such matters. Yet poor, illiterate Dalit women in rural areas have collectively resisted violence (Subramaniam 2006). The first Dalit Women's Solidarity Conference held in Bangalore (capital city of Karnataka) in 2001 served as a forum for dialogue specifically about violence against Dalits and the lack of protest of such violence by upper-caste women (Zelliot 2001).

Organized action against caste-gender-related violence has been a major issue addressed by organizations such as *Stree Shakti Sanghatana*, based in the southern city of Hyderabad in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1997). Similar organized action is also visible in rural areas. Consider, for instance, the protests and campaigns against untouchability and violence against Dalit women by the sanghas organized though the *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* (MSK) programme in the southern state of Karnataka (Subramaniam 2006). These sangha women have also actively sought representation in local, village-level governance institutions (Subramaniam 2006).

Forceful action in Northern India began in 2012 when 22 gang rapes of Dalit women occurred in Haryana (a few months before the now well-known case of Nirbhaya). Eight to ten activists, such as Asha Kotwal, the general secretary of *All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch* (AIDMAM), travelled across some districts

of Haryana and met with the survivors. Around 2014, AIDMAM enabled Dalit women to organize and resist the culture of violence. Led by Dalit women, many who are survivors of violence, the AIDMAM challenges gender-based violence that is rooted in caste (Chitnis 2015). Dalit women's activists travelled across some of the Northern Indian states as part of the Dalit Women's Self-Respect Yatra (march) to document the many cases of violence against Dalit women and build solidarity. Kotwal describes the process as being difficult. AIDMAM organized workshops on legal monitoring and understanding the law as well as on human rights instruments. It also focused on digital security, direct action and even self-defence trainings. These feminist groups also highlight how gender justice is not possible without considering the intersections of gender and caste with class.

Intersections of class with gender and caste are evident in the increasing appropriation of land and expansion of precarious labour, especially in the context of globalization (Ilaiah 2009; Guru 2016). Appropriation of land in the neo-liberal era has also resulted in a form of accumulation that is rationalized through individualized compensations (Guru 2016). Such individualization of systemic crises has led to the fragmentation of people's shared experience of exploitation and a weakening class consciousness (Guru 2016). Women's dependence on agricultural work as landless labourers often exacerbates their marginalization. Further, the demand for land reforms, particularly for women, has been relegated to the background (Ilaiah 2003). In addition to facing the triple oppression of gender, caste and class, political action by Dalit women is diminished further by their exclusion from civil society organizations. However, under some conditions – economic autonomy from the dominant class, external support from class-conscious social movement organizations, and supportive political configurations at the local level – Dalit women have engaged in collective action to demand implementation of social protections and land reforms to mitigate their conditions of impoverishment (Pattenden 2011; Illiah 2003).

In more recent years, Dalit assertion is also visible in college campuses where Dalit men and women have brought attention to institutional discrimination against Dalits in higher education (Teltumbde 2017; Dasgupta 2016). Ambedkar associations have emerged as a formidable force on college campuses, challenging the traditional student parties of both the right and the left. The rise of these parties was evident in the recent anti-caste uprising on college campuses, especially after the unfortunate death of a Dalit student leader, Rohith Vemula. Dalit protests led by college-educated men and women have brought new life to how caste and gender are discussed in the literature. Dalit women occupy a significant space online, through blogs such as *Savari* and *Round Table India*, where they bring attention to issues of caste and gender in urban spaces and particularly in higher education. These women have been able to engage in new ways of agenda building through the online medium.

Conclusion

While the rapidly changing political and economic scenario of the 1990s introduced an element of urgency and confusion, the women's movement has not

shown signs of flagging but challenges remain. Despite efforts to mobilize at the grass-roots, to document experiences through literature, and to seek formal political power, Dalit women's experiences have remained at the margins of both the Dalit movement and the autonomous women's movement. The latter has overlooked concerns of poverty (i.e., class) and caste. In India, an intersectional agenda for the women's movement must include the interests of rural, poor Dalit women. The intersections of class and caste shape women's experiences and therefore integrating Dalit women's interests in agenda building is essential. The mobilization of rurally based Dalit women through the Mahila Samakhya programme in Karnataka is an example of focusing on education by raising consciousness through collective organizing. Examining and understanding intersectional life experiences are challenging. Therefore, initiatives such as that by Rege et al. to bring together scholarship that considers 'caste and gender as entangled, but never easily equated and suggests a movement beyond the often assumed binaries of sameness/difference' may be a step that activists could continue to chart (2013: 35).

Through their agenda-building activities, Dalit women leaders have drawn attention to the intersections of caste, class and gender as critical for social change. Given the limitations of the autonomous women's movements, Dalit parties and leftist parties to include Dalit women's concerns, perhaps it is time for the autonomous women's movements, Dalit parties and leftist parties to acknowledge Dalit women's leadership as central to any struggle for social justice. In contrast to the rise of a single female leader such as Mayawati, who offered symbolic empowerment to Dalit women without transforming the agenda of BSP, it is also critical that Dalit women's leadership emerge and remain embedded in the grass-roots organizing of Dalit women. We argue that such interlinkages between grass-roots mobilizing and leadership can enable a sustainable form of agenda building that centre-stages intersectional concerns of gender, caste and class. In contrast, through their agenda-building activities, Dalit women's leaders have drawn attention to the intersections of caste and gender as critical for social change. In addition, starting from the 1980s, Dalit women have concertedly expressed their identity.

The 1980s witnessed increasing awareness of the caste-related existential reality of Dalit women as the NFDW and other related organizations expanded opportunities for challenging injustices. The increasing visibility of Dalit women through the Dalit women's movement and in the new knowledge-making processes (as teachers, writers, poets) drew attention to incidents of caste-related violence against women. By the late 1980s, Dalit women had become keenly aware of the urgency of asserting their identity and reclaiming their own space. Leaders of Dalit women's groups have concentrated efforts at the local, rural community level (e.g., Manik) as well as at a regional, national and urban level (e.g., Ruth Manorama) to challenge caste and gender discrimination. While gaining political power has provided both representational and symbolic power to Dalits, Dalit parties have not succeeded in transforming their agendas in ways that include the specific concerns of Dalit women. In contrast, through their agenda-building activities, Dalit women leaders have drawn attention to the intersections of class, caste and gender as critical for social change.

Notes

1 Although the origins of the caste system are widely debated, it is widely acknowledged that caste is a system of social stratification based on birth. Under Articles 341 and 342 of the Indian Constitution, certain castes, specified by public notification, have been deemed Scheduled Castes (SC) and are still among the poorest sections of Indian society. Outside the pale of the caste system, the SCs experience various types of discrimination, ranging from physical avoidance to exclusion from Hindu temples. They are from among the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Other descriptive terms used to refer to them are 'untouchables', '*Harijan*' (a term coined by Gandhi) and Dalits.
2 We draw on and extend on the distinction made by Graber (1993).

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